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Iowa: Small town pauses

by

David Kelly Young

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies (Arts and Humanities)

Major Professor: Katherine Gibbs

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
David Kelly Young
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

Intention

The intent of this paper is to establish an understanding of the thesis exhibition. Included are explanations of why I chose small town Iowa as a subject matter and the relation to past influences and techniques. Within the thesis will be reflections of small town Iowa as an institution and a source of aesthetic pleasure. This thesis and exhibition is to explore small town Iowa through my writing and artwork and highlight many of the positive aspects of Iowa life.

Artist Statement

Character, color, light and shadows, these are key aspects in my journeys through small town Iowa. It was never my intention to capture the picture perfect postcard scene. Instead I look for a skewed or off-center view. The way that I chose the photograph became just as important as the final piece. The time of day, the inclusion of particular subject matter and minor research into a town influence the way I want to develop a scene. It was never a goal to champion small towns and the causes that stem from them, instead I wanted to capture the potential beauty that is there and expound on that.

HISTORICAL COMPARISON

Source of Imagery and Contemporary Influence

Beginning at an early age I have always been very attentive of detail and the intricacies of color. Many hours growing up were spent working a large jigsaw puzzle or filling a coloring book. Making all of the patterns and colors of the puzzle pieces into a complete picture was and still is very fulfilling. This early experience was a precursor to my fascination with color and minute details in everyday scenes. My eyes are always exploring my surroundings for the nooks and crannies of the world. From my eyes to the camera's eye the scenes of children playing, bright colors, rustic yet proud buildings and the beauty that is small town Iowa are then open to my own personal interpretation. Not everyone will see Iowa in the same light. This is my approach, my view on how small town Iowa exists.

The photo-realistic style that I employ is quite reminiscent of the artist Richard Estes. Like Estes, light is a very key component to my compositions. Estes elaborates on his use of light and shadow, "I've always considered light to be the real subject of painting, which is another reason to work realistically, illusionistically" (Meisel, 12). The interaction of light and shadow are considerably important to the success of my artwork. Like Estes' New York City light, my pieces capture the time of day and essence of the particular town that I was in. The bright light of summer days in Iowa in contrast to the dark shadows breathe life into the final composition. Estes stressed the importance of light in artwork, "You give an illusion of light. The lightest light is nothing compared to

the gray outside. The deepest black is nothing compared to reality. You give the illusion of light. You condense it to a small scale” (Meisel, 12).

As important to my art as light and shadow are, a strong rationale can be made for the significance of color. Like the relishment of the picture puzzles and coloring books of my past, I like to have a wide variety of tones and hues in my compositions. A scene nearly devoid of color is not as appealing to me as an explosion of both manufactured and natural colors. The many different shades of brick buildings, old and new, please the eye and electrify the subject within a composition. With the inclusion of a wide variety of automobiles the drawing gains another aspect of color throughout the piece. Often the cars are the contemporary connection that contrast the buildings of the past.

All the steps that go into a finished drawing are like the pieces of the puzzle. Building on that concept are the color choices I make en route to bringing the drawing to life. From the original photograph to the final piece there is much variation. By employing the photograph I can capture the mood, weather conditions and the light that caught my eye on that particular day. The photograph is a frozen vision in my mind and a reminder of the scene. Looking at the photograph aides in recapturing the mood that the town and the setting gave me on the day I was there. Through this concept, I can ascend into my own interpretation and artists’ eye. Many of the colors are more vibrant, the focus tends to be sharper, and the edges more honed when comparing the final piece to the original photograph. Richard Estes elaborates on how he uses photographs:

It goes through your mind. You know that one tree is ten feet in front of another and

you try to get that feeling; you try to get the air around it . One evolves ways of doing this. A photograph is just values. It doesn't have line. When you use the photograph, you are using the values, but you are adding line and space and movement, coming from your experience. That's why, although I work from photographs, I like the subject to be things I'm really familiar with. I don't think I could use someone else's photograph of some place I've never been to and make a painting. Although I could copy the photograph, I really wouldn't have a feeling for the place. You're always remembering, and the photograph is like a reference you use, a sketch. (Meisel, 19)

Many of the philosophies of Estes are quite similar to my own. I would choose to take my own photograph and not be assigned what to use for a subject. Colored pencil is my media of choice while Estes works in paints. Some could call Estes a regionalist with his many paintings of New York City. My present exploration of small town Iowa echoes of themes similar to that of a regionalist. Like Estes' love of New York, I chose Iowa as my subject matter, because I can strongly relate to Iowa life.

In the realm of the regionalists and more specifically Iowa regionalists, a philosophical comparison to my art work can be made to that of the artist Grant Wood. Like Grant Wood I grew up in a small Iowa town and was profoundly influenced by my surroundings. "The joys of snowy winters and the wonders of Iowa's woods and streams" (Iowa: An American Portrait). Highly compelling to my vision was the desire of riding bikes to another small town on a hot summer day. Playing in the neighborhood in the evening without fear, the early morning paper routes, the sandlot games, this was the delight of a small town . Like Grant Wood I gained a greater appreciation of small town life after moving to a larger community. "But it took Wood many years to develop pride in "midwesternness" and the desire to paint his roots. After leaving the farm,

almost three decades and twenty years of painting would pass before he explored his rural upbringing in his art” (Corn, 4).

Autobiographical and Inspiration

After successfully completing three photo realistic compositions of New Orleans cityscapes, I, like Wood felt the urge to explore Iowa. Growing older makes one reflect more on one’s childhood, in this way I am no different. Growing up in a small town and having an adventurous spirit gave me a unique perspective of the world, I never felt trapped or bored. There was always something to do. Keeping an active imagination and open mind was vital growing up in small town Iowa. “Through the eyes of a ten year old boy this was a place of adventure and daily discoveries (Iowa: An American Portrait).

As a very young child, until the age of seven, I lived in Mason City, Iowa. Upon leaving Mason City my family moved to Plymouth which was remarkably smaller in size and population. One of the great revelations was the size of the town allowed for greater freedom and safety. Although we didn’t remain in Plymouth for very long, the taste of small towns was in my blood and I loved the possibilities for seeking adventure. Our next stop was the town of Manly, which quickly became the world’s largest playground.

While Manly was larger than Plymouth we were still much smaller than our neighbors ten miles south, Mason City. We started out in the country, a fact aided in my exploratory skills. Many discoveries were to be made. Many terrains were there to be explored. “My town was a giant game board” (Iowa: An

American Portrait). Manly was just the right size for my friends and I. We could walk anywhere, we could bike anywhere. "There was a freedom to follow curiosity almost anywhere in our small town without much worry or restraint" (Iowa: An American Portrait).

It was this way of life that inspired me to return to the small towns of Iowa. I have tremendous respect for these towns, the architecture, the people, and the character of the communities. No, these towns do not have all the advantages of larger cities, but then again, it does not have the disadvantages of those cities either. The size of Manly was important to the establishment of my character. Many free moments were spent exploring it and the surrounding area. "Big enough for a boy to find adventure, small enough so he was never out of sight of someone who cared" (Iowa: An American Portrait).

I feel that this deeply personal connection to small town Iowa led me to the exploration I have taken in my graduate work. After exploring several different areas and media of art it wasn't until the success of my New Orleans pieces that I discovered my love for the colored pencil. The texture and temperability of the colored pencil fulfills my love of color and tactile senses. My decision to go to graduate school was based on my need to further develop my broad undergraduate program. Without much deliberation it was easy to establish small town Iowa as an area of investigation close to my heart.

The pleasures I experienced in childhood prompted me to celebrate and highlight what all too many consider a dying breed, the small town. I don't see them as dying, instead I see them as surviving. I love to see these towns still

thriving. I love to see that they are not thriving too much. The character and persona that these towns have maintained through the years still exists. Many of the old buildings have been replaced, but just as many older structures are still going strong.

Including and stirring together the new and the old components of a town is something I feature in my art. Of course there is going to be shiny brand new cars parked on the street but housed on that same street are the age-old buildings. The old edifices seem to be standing guard, making sure that the young ones don't get out of hand. Small towns wouldn't be what they are without history sprinkled throughout their confines. Just driving through the Iowa countryside in the summertime evokes a flood of inspiration. Around every corner there is a potential scene to be captured, a world to be taken in.

PROCESS

My artwork has and never will be about finding the perfect picture postcard scene and reproducing it. I don't see myself as a mere human photocopy machine. The process that I have developed was a long time coming. One of the greatest assets was that I chose a subject matter which I really enjoyed and had strong feelings about. How can one not gain at least a small matter of pride from growing up in an Iowa small town? Keeping my mind and spirit open to the world around me allowed me to have the greatest appreciation for the beauty in what many others may overlook.

Sometimes I believe I see things in a town that others may have never noticed. The cracks in a weathered cornerstone, the rusty bottle cap wedged in the seam of the sidewalk, the paint flaking away on the sign at the gas station, details that are observable to everyone, yet somehow overlooked. I remember walking down the streets in the heat of the summer and sinking in the squishy tar of the streets. I remember putting pennies on the train tracks. I remember rolling down the hills of town on my bike, coasting as far as possible without pedaling. The numerous bottles of pop, beating the heat in the air conditioning of the farmers' co-op, wading in the creeks and the bicycles that delivered me to the world.

Some of the towns and scenes I visit are ones that I am familiar with, and have remained etched upon my mind. Other towns are those I may have happened upon by chance, heard of from others, or even did minor research on. The many books and brochures on Iowa often provide samplings of what may or

may not be my next subject. I have embarked on several photography tours.

Another name for these tours could be road trips. I will frequently discover the scene I want purely by accident. There is not always a plan: grab a map, hit a county road and aim for the many towns dotted along the way. I look for the scenes that are captivating yet will not be the feature shot on a brochure. "Great spaces and small warm corners" (Iowa: An American Portrait). The place may be walked on or past by many people in one day. These are places that ordinarily wouldn't be in the foreground. The forgotten became the featured.

In the same manner of thinking my scene will purposely be askew, off centered with a unique perspective to them. I will always avoid the idyllic scene. A traffic light, telephone pole or any object being in the way does not spoil the picture. It is those things that are welcomed into the setting. The colors and imperfections in the everyday objects in a town make the picture speak. If the world was a perfect place it would be pretty boring. The wrinkles on a grandmother are not unappealing, instead they are the lines that tell a story. The cracks in a building or sidewalk are its' wrinkles, its' tale to reveal. Imperfections are part of life so why not include them? The flaws and true colors make the final arrangement much more appealing.

Taking the photograph is just the first step toward the final composition. The process continues by enlarging the original photo through the use of a color copier. The color copier is another sequence that alters the color scheme of the photo. Although the change is not dramatic the subtleties of the color copy are apparent and is the duplication that I form a grid system by. In most cases, I

double the size of the color copy which is at least three times the size of the original photograph. I have made in two compositions, "Gridlock" (Fig. 10) and "Mob Scene" (Fig. 12), the size four times the original.

I feel the color system that I have developed is possibly the strongest asset to my final pieces. I feel that the colors should be as true to the natural color as possible. Discovering my passion for colored pencils as the media of choice was like getting a whole new set of adult crayons. The near countless array of colors allows me to mix and layer colors to formulate a wide variety of hues and tones. As a rule, I do not use black within my art work. As in nature, whenever a shadow is cast upon something, the shadow is just a much darker version of the surface underneath.

The vibrant color of a traffic light (Fig. 9) or a red park bench (Fig. 11) are not comprised of just one solid color. Surrounding objects and textures on the surface will affect the given object in both color and light cast upon it. I prefer to consider every detail the scene contains. The manner in which the leaves cluster in a tree, the direction the grass is swaying in the foreground, even the dirt on the bumper of a car--no element is overlooked. The most minute detail makes all the difference to a particular entity. This attention to detail, as in Estes' work, speaks volumes for the sense of realism I intended.

The final, but no less important, aspect to my drawings is the choice of paper. The textured paper combined with the colored pencil lends favorably to the composition. Often the tooth of the paper supports the scene. The bumps and craters of the surface serve as a miniature facet of pointillism. The texture

of the street in “Rush Hour” (Fig. 6) is an example of this concept. From a distance these small inflections are not noticeable. Up close the same scars can be the gravel on a street, the grains in wood or the bark on a tree. The color of the paper is in the range of a flannel gray. This fairly neutral hue acts as the background color of everyday life. The bits of light show through as if they are nature’s bits and pieces that the naked eye oversees.

Another element to my final exhibition is the inclusion of contemplative paragraphs which will include a short essay that reflects on the particular scene. The majority of the passages will be expressive and ruminate about both the actual town depicted and small town Iowa life in general. The experiences I had growing up in Manly and Plymouth made a profound impact on me and have inspired me to write short stories of the adventures. Through these short paragraphs, I want to convey a manner of thinking beyond just the picture. I want to spark a sense of small town Iowa life. The viewer is invited to step into the picture and walk the streets of the town in the scene. This is not a spiritual exploration, but an invitation to see this aspect of Iowa. This is how I feel about small towns. I want to share the slices of life from small town Iowa with those who may already know what the experience is like and those who may have never been here.

GUIDE TO VISUAL IMAGERY

The primary goal of my exhibition is to capture the essence of small town Iowa. The beauty is not only in the visual sense. There is a captivating spirit on the back roads of this state. One can perceive within them the harsh feeling of a dangerous part of a big city as they approach it. In the same way, when you enter an Iowa town, the safe and warm feeling you get is evident.

The titles that I give my compositions is not to mock the small town but just the opposite. A title such as "Rush Hour" (Fig. 6) echoes a sentiment of praise. This rush hour is all the larger that this town will see. There is pride in not having the traffic congestion and pushing crowds of larger cities. These titles promote the fact the towns have only to worry about things such as traffic jams in only the most minor sense. Small town Iowa is not about preaching high morals. The simplicities of life and the pleasures they bring are readily evident:

Bred of the soil, nurtured in an atmosphere of decades of mutual help. Iowans Seem totally removed from the social distinctions that have created distrust and formed the protective veneer that is common to more populous areas. They exude a mid-western easiness that speaks of a contentment built of trust, and a deep formed the protective veneer that is common to more populous areas. They exude a mid-western easiness that speaks of a contentment built of trust, and a deep awareness of the special bounty of the soil on which they live. (Berger, p.7)

In the early stages of my Iowa series there was a less complex and more explorative nature to the drawings. I sensed a need to start out with a basic setting. The first set of drawings had a primary basis of subject matter.

Compositons such as "Rush Hour" (Fig.6) and "Clear Lake Bedlam" (Fig. 2) had little subject matter yet the scene intrigued me. Those early photographs tended to be more ideal in their setting. I began to discover that the photographs that interested me the most were those that were less than idealized. I found a greater sense of realism by purposely taking the photograph off center, allowing objects to be in the foreground and literally letting the world go by.

"Uproar In Iowa Falls" (Fig. 5) is an example of a composition with a view that is askew. By aiming the view finder through the tunnel of trees I could give a view one might see on an afternoon stroll through the park. This is an everyday scene in the town. The broad leaves of the tree hang down into the scene because of the angle that I wanted to look at the church. Life is not full of picture postcards. Children running between the bushes, birds perched on benches, townspeople stopping by to drink in the delicious weather, this is the scene they would see. Idealized settings are in the picture books and fairy tales. Small town Iowa is genuine and I want my visions of it to be as well.

Another recurring characteristic of my drawings is placement of objects in the foreground. The rock in "Small Town Riot" (Fig. 3), the post in "Clear Lake Bedlam" (Fig. 2) and the awning in "Country Chaos" all were consciously contrived to be in the way. Walking or sitting in these places would give a person this view. Coming out of a shop in Winterset, running down to the water in Clear Lake and cutting through the park in Fontanelle. These are ordinary occurrences in small town Iowa.

Objects placed in the foreground became an even more important

circumstance in later pieces. "Traffic Jam" (Fig. 9), "Sitting Room Only" (Fig. 11), and "Cross Town Commute" (Fig. 14), were scenes contrived by the strong up front entities alone. The traffic light in "Traffic Jam" (Fig. 9), while not large enough to overshadow the rest of the scene, does hold an important role in the composition. The rich color of the paint on the traffic signal beams out of the scene at the viewer. It would be easy to avoid the traffic light altogether or omit it from the drawing. The challenge of developing the color of the paint within a composition enticed me into placing it in front of the building instead of going around it.

Two recent compositions have objects considerably close to the viewer. The red bench in "Sitting Room Only" (Fig. 11) and the lamp post in "Cross Town Commute" (Fig. 14), stand out as much as the rest of the scene, yet both need the entire setting for a successful piece. These scenes too were selected for the foreground subjects. Both the lamp post and the bench I found to be very captivating. Happening upon the areas, I instantly knew that these were objects important to the scene. The brightness of the red bench and the smoothness of the lamp post globe spoke to me. These, some might say obtrusive objects, complete the compositions. The deletion of these objects would alter the whole perspective. Without them the realism would be gone, the idealistic aspect would take over.

Actually allowing the world to pass before me solidifies the realistic concept. The boy pedaling his bike across the street in "Hustle and Bustle" (Fig. 16) is an excellent example of this. Originally wanting to capture the impressive

building, I had no idea that the red shirted youngster would race through my view finder. Instances such as this bring the scene down to earth. In a traditional postcard the photographer chooses the time of day and setting to avoid any interruptions, but is this what life is like? Figures pass through the scenes on their personal destinations in "Rush hour" (Fig. 6), "Hustle and Bustle" (Fig. 16), "Crowd Control" (Fig. 15) and "Mob Scene" (Fig. 12). I told these persons nothing. I controlled no part of their actions. I accepted them into the picture because they were there. This is everyday small town Iowa. The spectacle can be witnessed by anyone in the town or a traveler passing through. Movie settings are contrived and staged. Life occurs in Iowa as it might anywhere else. It is allowing a scene to transpire, instead of creating it, that lets these visits to rural Iowa tangible.

"We explored the back alleys and climbed the ice rimmed snowbanks" (Iowa: An American Portrait). The feel of Iowa is unique. I want the compositions to be not only realistic in the visual sense, but stimulate a mood or feeling of the locale. Feel the warm pavement and bright sunlight of a sweltering Iowa summer in "Rush Hour" (Fig. 6). Breathe in the fresh mown grass and brush up against the scales of the flaking paint on the bench in "Sitting Room Only" (Fig. 11). Those who have been to these unique places may know the ever present sensations. The spray of mist from the fountain hits you in "Crowd Control" (Fig. 15) as you wave hello to the young boy. The cool air of the morning is clean and brisk while you stop to admire the pristine Clarksville Diner in "Breakfast Clamor" (Fig. 18). Memories of small town Iowa permeate my soul.

Violence only came to us through our televisions. Innocence was still attainable. I explored through a surrealistic aspect how Iowa can be vital to children. In "Small Town Riot" (Fig. 3) and "Home Town Mayhem" (Fig. 4) the inclusion of toys symbolize the innocence and depict the town as a giant playground. The surroundings are nurturing "an almost complete support system" (Iowa: An American Portrait). The friendly faces and mixture of old and new influences surround Iowans with an encouraging atmosphere. "Iowans have always understood that interdependence is necessary for survival" (Iowa: An American Portrait).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Iowa is a special place. The character of Iowa towns can be discovered by traveling through the many small towns dotted throughout the countryside. Small towns as an institution are a quickly dying breed. I want to portray the towns as very much the opposite of entities that are wasting away. Small communities in Iowa often serve as bedroom towns. Yet does one ever consider the rich history and charm that comes with rural Iowa? There is beauty around every corner. People with roots in a small town may have a better appreciation for the intricacies of little town life. "No, Iowa is not boring, but it does demand a fresh and almost childlike imagination to really appreciate it, an imagination that is attentive and searching" (Erickson, Pg. VIII).

I do not want to portray the towns as decaying on the vine, instead I want to point out the life that remains. Some of the most unique architecture in the world can be found in Iowa. Many buildings were one-of-a-kind creations and should be treated with respect. Each community has its' own personality. The people who live in these towns take pride in where they live. Photographs and drawings of these towns capture an essence and invite viewers on an imaginative tour. The persona and aesthetic of a town bring about the establishment of a character. If one takes the time to look around them in a drive through Iowa, each character comes forth. Take the time to pause, stop and admire the world around you. Iowa has an abundance of spectacular visions. These are frozen moments in time. Small town Iowa is visually prosperous. I invite you to pause with me and explore the visual hesitations of Iowa.

APPENDIX:
SELECTED WORKS



Figure 1. *Dillinger Was Here.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 2. *Clear Lake Bedlam.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 3. *Small Town Riot.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 19" x 17.5"



Figure 4. *Home Town Mayhem.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 22" x 19"



Figure 5. *Uproar In Iowa Falls.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 6. *Rush Hour.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 20" x 17"



Figure 7. *Keep The Noise Down.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 8. *Country Chaos*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 22" x 19"



Figure 9. *Traffic Jam.* 1997

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 10. *Gridlock*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 42" x 29"



Figure 11. *Sitting Room Only.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 22" x 17"



Figure 12. *Mob Scene*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 42" x 29"



Figure 13. *Commotion*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 22" x 19"



Figure 14. *Cross Town Commute.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 16" x 21"



Figure 15. *Crowd Control*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 16. *Hustle and Bustle*. 1998

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"



Figure 17. *Order In the Court.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 15" x 22"



Figure 18. *Breakfast Clamor.* 1998

Colored Pencil. 21" x 17"

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